

WHY CAN'T I FOLLOW JESUS ALONE?

ACTS 2:42-47

A recent TV news report estimated that 70% of American don't do any regular, intentional physical exercise. That leaves 30% who do exercise. Did you know that only 10% of the folk who do exercise do so alone? The remaining 90% of those who exercise regularly and intentionally do so with a family member or a friend. I can relate to those statistics. Cheryl and I have discovered that we both enjoy hiking or walking as a primary way to get some regular exercise. Fortunately, we live very close to Highbanks Metro Park and we're over there quite a bit getting in our miles. There are days when I don't want to take a hike, but she encourages me to do it anyway. There are days when Cheryl doesn't want to take a hike, but I encourage her to do it anyway. There are days when neither one of us wants to take a hike like this past week when it's cold and icy, but we guilt each other into doing it. The fact is most of us get more exercise regularly if someone else is encouraging us and holding us accountable.

Now, God has just made us relational beings. We need other people. If that principle is true when it comes to physical exercise, there is plenty of evidence in the Bible that it's just as true when it comes to spiritual exercise. Spiritual exercise is another way of thinking about discipleship. Discipleship is a Bible word for what it means to follow Jesus. That's what we've been thinking about together in this message series on following Jesus that began back in January. When Jesus invited people to follow Him almost 2,000 years ago, it meant they literally started following Him around the country of Israel. We can't do that today, obviously, but we're still invited to follow Jesus and be His disciples, nonetheless. So, how do we actually do that?

Here's a truth I want you to ponder with me today. Your growth as a disciple of Jesus depends on building and nurturing relationships with other disciples of Jesus. You won't get very far at all in this whole business of following Jesus if you try to do it alone. That doesn't mean being Jesus' follower or His disciple is any less personal or individual. You can only ever become a follower of Jesus personally and individually! But, if you want to grow as Jesus' disciple, you need other disciples to help you get there. Here's the first of three statements I want you to think with me about.

FOLLOWING JESUS DEMANDS PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH FELLOW DISCIPLES.

Think with me about the example of Jesus Himself. After He called twelve men to be his first disciples, He made a practice of being with them. Did Jesus have a formal discipleship training program? Apparently not. Did he found a college or a seminary? Absolutely not. Did He pass out a 12 week curriculum? Nope. Jesus' discipleship strategy amounted to having these twelve men follow Him around, hear Him preach, watch Him perform miracles, observe how He interacted with people, and listen to Him teach them about God and life. When Jesus called them, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons." (Mk 3:14-15 NIV) We tend to focus on the preaching and ability to cast out demons, but overlook what came first. What came

first? They were with Jesus. They had a personal relationship with Jesus. They spent time with Jesus. That was the real key to their being Jesus' disciples. Everything else flowed from that personal relationship with Jesus. We sometimes think that Jesus was always available to everyone all the time. The Gospels present a very different picture. He spent most of His time with those twelve men. In fact, author Robert Coleman observes, "He actually spent more time with his disciples than with everybody else in the world put together." Read the Gospels again and notice how often the disciples were in a group – all twelve, three here, four there, a group of women disciples, another larger group called the Seventy. Jesus' followers were very seldom alone. What's the lesson? If you're going to follow Jesus well, you will have other disciples walking along with you. You and I need other Jesus followers and they need you and me so that we can all get to where we are supposed to be going: being like Jesus.

Two months passed after Jesus went back to Heaven after His crucifixion and resurrection. The Holy Spirit came down upon 120 disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem, Peter preached a sermon and 3,000 people responded to the invitation to start following Jesus that very same day. Instant mega-church! Turn with me in your Bible now and let's read what that first church looked like. **READ, p. 1079.** What do you notice? I notice lots of personal relating. "They devoted... everyone was filled... all the believers... they gave to anyone... they continued to meet together... they broke bread and ate together... and the Lord added to their number...." When you read through the book of Acts, which is the story of the spread of Christianity in the first century, you see how those who became Jesus' disciples were brought immediately into association with other disciples who had followed Jesus for a longer period of time. Discipleship happened with other people – other disciples. Discipleship took place in homes. It would be several centuries before Christians built church buildings. No Christian colleges or seminaries had been founded yet. Instead learners and teachers were drawn together in the most casual, natural settings. I'm not criticizing church buildings, colleges or seminaries. They're just not necessary to following Jesus then or now.

We forget that the widespread ability to read and write is a relatively modern development. What did you do back in the Middle Ages if you wanted to follow Jesus? It was highly unlikely you had access to a Bible and you wouldn't have been able to read it even if you could! You came together with other followers of Jesus every day to hear the Bible read. You prayed together every day. You worshipped together every day and then went off to your work. Discipleship was something you did with other people. What do people in 3rd world countries today do if they want to follow Jesus? Many of them can't read or write either. Following Jesus is much more of a relational thing - the whole community of God's people coming together to get closer to Jesus.

So, what helps you and me grow as disciples – as followers – or Jesus? Certainly the Holy Spirit who lives within us. Certainly reading and meditating on the Bible. Certainly prayer. Certainly serving others in the name of Jesus. Certainly events and circumstances in our lives that God teaches us through. Just don't miss another very important way to grow as a disciple of Jesus: personal relationship with other disciples. Another word for it is community. Community, spiritually speaking, describes the

personal relationships we form to help us live out our beliefs. God never intended you and me to follow Jesus alone. We will always do better when others help us. Here's a second thought to ponder....

FOLLOWING JESUS DEMANDS INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH FELLOW DISCIPLES.

I want you to notice that the first Christians – the first group of disciples beyond the Twelve – were very intentional about creating, building and maintaining personal relationship with other followers of Jesus. What do I mean by being intentional? Well, at the very least, intentionality means pursuing godly community continually. In the Acts passage we read earlier, we read these words, “All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42 NLT) These first Christians devoted themselves to four expressions of their faith: teaching, fellowship, sharing meals which included the Lord’s Supper, and prayer. The grammar here makes it clear that they devoted themselves to these things continually. It wasn’t hit or miss. It wasn’t occasional. It wasn’t once or twice a year whether you needed it or not. They devoted themselves continually, regularly, consistently, persistently, over and over again – to teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. And the clear implication is that they did these four things together and they did them continually.

It’s intriguing to me that they devoted themselves continually to fellowship. Whatever it was, it was distinct enough from teaching, breaking bread, and prayer that it deserved its own category. This was community – the deliberate and intentional living out of profound personal relationships based on Jesus and sustained by Jesus. It’s more than just hanging out. It’s more than just friendly conversation about the weather and the Buckeyes. It’s helping one another follow Jesus better. It’s the cultivation of quality personal relationships with other disciples of Jesus – other followers of Jesus - who share the life of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps this is what the Bible means when we read, “Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.” (Heb 10:24-25 NLT)

So, what does that look like today almost 2,000 years later? I believe that leads to a second thought about intentional relationships. It means being open to many, diverse discipling relationships. Some of us were discipled as kids, teenagers and young adults by godly parents. That was true of me personally, and it’s only been recently that I’ve recognized how few followers of Jesus have been discipled by godly parents. The parent-child relationship is probably the single best discipling relationship out there if it’s done well by godly parents. That’s one reason it’s painful to me when I encounter Christian parents who expect the local church to be the primary place where your kids learn how to follow Jesus. Of course, the church can and should help, but there’s no way it’s more important than the home and the family! Sunday School classes and small groups for all ages can be very helpful as long as they get you beyond just developing friendships. Don’t get me wrong! Friendship often opens the door to

discipleship, but just being someone's friend isn't the same as discipleship. We're currently in the early days of trying to create a discipleship culture in our church. I believe a part of that will be the availability of more intentional one-to-one relationships, or face to face gatherings of three or four people. To do what? Study Scripture together, pray together, serve others together, and hold each other accountable to follow Jesus better. Think of these relationships as having a kind of mentoring or coaching flavor to them, but the subject will be how to follow Jesus better. Some of us here today want and need to be coached or mentored spiritually. We're still trying to figure out what it means to love Jesus through all the highways and byways of life. Some of us here today want and need to coach or mentor others spiritually. You've been following Jesus for decades now. No, you haven't gotten it all figured out yet, but you have valuable insights to share with others that can help them follow Jesus better.

Author Dallas Willard wrote something thought provoking. "We must flatly say that one of the greatest contemporary barriers to meaningful spiritual formation (discipleship) into Christlikeness is overconfidence in the spiritual efficacy of 'regular church services.' They are vital, they are not enough, it is that simple." In other words, you can't get everything you need to follow Jesus well by attending one worship service a week! That's one of the great myths in American Christianity! Of course, worship services are important. But let's face it, they're not highly relational events even with our greeting time. If you're going to grow in what it means to follow Jesus, you're going to have to open yourself intentionally to a variety of discipling relationships. If the vast majority of us need others to keep up any semblance of regular physical exercise, then the vast majority of us need other disciples of Jesus to help us get regular spiritual exercise, too. If you think you're the exception, I guarantee you that you're not!

Here's one more thought about intentional relationships. They require you to take personal initiative to make them happen. Let's recognize and admit something about ourselves that makes discipleship hard to get into. Most of us want to live private little lives. Just me and God! America may indeed be the home of "rugged individualism", but the Bible knows nothing about it. Whether we admit it not, some of us here today are thinking, "Look, I don't really need other Christians to follow Jesus. Just give me a decent sermon on Sunday, let me sing a few worship songs, and put my offering in the plate. Maybe I'll listen to a preacher on the radio or on my iPod this week, but on my own in private." Imagine one of the Buckeye football players saying to Coach Meyer, "Hey, Coach! Don't bug me with all this talk about teamwork, pulling together, and playing for one another, OK? All I need is Ohio Stadium, a big crowd, and the ball. Working out with all these other guys and having to learn plays is a real drag. Just gimme the ball and have everybody get outta my way. I do better all alone." How long do you think that young athlete would be around? God arranged things so that we do our best work as team members. We need each other. The Bible says, "If we love our brothers and sisters who are believers, it proves that we have passed from death to life...." (1 John 3:14 NLT) Think about that verse. It says that you can know that you're born again, saved, and have eternal life because you love God's people. When you love people, you find ways to be with them. You do life with them to some extent. You

take some personal initiative to make that happen. Quickly, here's a third statement I want you to think with me about and then I'm done.

FOLLOWING JESUS DEMANDS ACCOUNTABLE RELATIONSHIPS WITH FELLOW DISCIPLES.

OK, so personal relationships with other disciples of Jesus can help me grow. OK, they don't just happen on their own. I have to be intentional about creating, building, and nurturing them. But how exactly can discipling relationships help me get better in following Jesus? Well, there does have to be godly accountability in those relationships for you to get better at following Jesus.

When godly accountability is present, it will help you conquer sin. Sometimes we Protestants criticize our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters because of their belief that you need to confess your sins to a priest to receive forgiveness. We might be right theologically, but being able to admit and confess our sins and weaknesses to other selected followers of Jesus would help all of us get closer to Jesus. It's hard for sin to get a grip in your life if you're transparent with another brother and sister in Christ. They can help us say no to temptation better. They can test our words and motives. They can lovingly point out our phoniness or hypocrisy. They can help us be more honest and real as we follow Jesus. They can help to rescue us from making serious errors in judgment. The fact is we need each other to follow Jesus well.

When godly accountability is present, it will help you learn how to give and receive grace. We're all broken by sin and its effects in our lives. Accountability doesn't mean putting yourself under the control or domination of someone who is going to judge you, criticize you, or tear you down. But let's acknowledge that accountability does mean learning how to practice godly submission to others who walk with Jesus. It means having the humility to recognize that I need others who love Jesus to help me see what God wants me to be and to do. It means inviting others to speak into your life. We need each other to follow Jesus well.

Here's something else about accountability. It will require sacrifice. What kind of sacrifice? Time, for one thing. If you're going to get face to face with other followers of Jesus so you can all get better at following Jesus, it will require the sacrifice of your precious time. Energy, too. Spiritual, emotional and physical energy. Have you ever had a personal relationship that didn't require effort on your part? If you don't give something to a relationship, it doesn't survive and grow. The loss of privacy is another sacrifice. We value privacy highly in our country. Some people even find privacy in the Constitution – they talk about the right to privacy. The Bible never says you have a right to your privacy. Instead, it puts value on a godly, humble kind of transparency that can say, in so many words, "Look, I'm really messed up without God, but He's transforming me so that one day I will look just like Jesus." We need each other to follow Jesus well.

But let's not forget the best thing about accountability. It results in joy. Don't you hear that sense of joy in the description we read earlier of the first Christians there in Acts 2?

It was such joy for them to belong to God and to each other. Every day they'd meet together somewhere close to the Temple in Jerusalem – praying, praising God, and sharing with each other what God had done for them and in them. Gratitude and thankfulness permeated the atmosphere. Praising and worshipping God together was just the natural thing to do. And the Lord began to add newly saved people to their group every day. We need each other to follow Jesus well.

When Kevin Miller was a kid, Saturday mornings often included a trip downtown to Hooper Wolfe's hardware store. Hooper Wolfe's had an old wood door, painted white except where the paint was worn off near the handle. You walked in, and you could hardly move. There were two narrow aisles. The counters were filled with merchandise, shelves were overflowing, and stuff was hanging from the ceiling. Kevin would think to himself, "No way are we going to find anything in here." But they didn't need to. As soon as you walked in, Clarence, from behind the counter would say, "Help you today?" Kevin's dad would say something like, "I want to hang a light out back."

Clarence would come out from behind the counter and ask questions. "Where you going to hang it? Over the patio? Well then"—and he would start rummaging through shelves until he pulled out just the right light—"you want a light like this. And don't use these bolts here; they're good for indoor stuff, but for outdoor, you want something galvanized. "Your wall is brick, isn't it?" It amazed young Kevin that Clarence actually knew what their house was made of! "Well, to run the conduit through there, you want a masonry drill bit at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch. If we don't have that in stock, you can get one over at Miller's Lumberyard." Then Clarence would pull a pencil off his ear, get out a little piece of paper and sketch it all out. "The conduit goes here ... and make sure you don't mount the light too close to the soffit."

When I have a project I head to Home Depot. Unlike Hooper Wolfe's, where you had to parallel park on the street, there's an ocean of parking. And inside, Home Depot is huge. The ceilings are 30 feet high. Home Depot has forty times the inventory of a hardware store like Hooper Wolfe's. It all looks really great under all those bright lights. There's a guy in an orange apron - a block away – if I need help. If I run him down, he's likely to say, "Sorry. I usually work in paints. I'm just covering in electrical because someone called in sick." So I'm pretty much on my own.

A similar thing has happened in the American church. We have all these amazing programs and technological sophistication. But something's missing. Clarence. We all need a spiritual Clarence - someone who knows more than we do and who will help us follow Jesus better. Throughout the Bible this is the primary way faith was passed on. Moses trains Joshua in how to lead. Eli trains Samuel in how to pray. Jesus teaches the Twelve. Timothy's grandmother, Lois, trains up her daughter, Eunice, who trains up her son, Timothy. Paul disciples two fellow tentmakers, Priscilla and Aquila, who then disciple Apollos. When it comes to helping people grow into spiritual maturity, the Bible gives us "the Clarence Principle". The older teach the younger, and the more mature in the faith guide those who are newer in the faith. You just can't follow Jesus very well alone. We need each other to follow Jesus well.